

# A Reflection on the Works of Paulo Freire and its Relevance to Classroom Teaching

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## **Abstract**

Most of the social, economic and political problems of the third world countries are said to have their roots in the problem of illiteracy, 'banking education' and lack of dialogue in their education systems. These are some of the issues that the philosopher Paulo Freire has addressed in most of his works. This paper therefore aims at presenting a reflection of the works of Paulo Freire. While taking into account of a typical Kenyan classroom context, the paper presents the relevance of Freire's philosophy. It discusses Freire's philosophy in the areas of teaching-learning environment, comparing their philosophical ideas and their relevance in modern times.

## **Key words**

Praxis, Codification, Humanization, Conscientization, Banking Education

## **Introduction**

Education imparted by schools helps an individual to live a balanced life. It is this education that many believe contributes to the overall development of an individual. However, the present educational system in Kenya is producing mechanical individuals who are engaged in learning lessons by heart to pass their national exams rather than utilizing education in their day to day life. The practice of following the curriculum solely by teachers for the purpose of garnering good examination grades contributes to the nations' education tendency which encourages rote learning instead of critical thinking skills.

With the present condition of poverty, lack of adequate facilities and improper training of teachers, a quality educational system remains a distant dream for most third world economies, Kenya included. One of the prominent features of the country's style of teaching lies in the dominant use of textbooks. Besides this, the education given in schools is based on unilateral approach where emphasis is on teachers teaching and not on students learning.

Present educational system is not providing opportunities for students to bring the best out of themselves. Great emphasis is placed on narration and memorizing thus neglecting creative and

critical thinking. The system is heavily loaded with subject units that are not related to the day today experiences of the students. Thus the student can only attempt to master the material without critically applying it to his life or to the needs of the society.

This methodology needs to be changed so that learning becomes a real cognitive activity which leads to meaningful and purposeful transformative action. Accumulating knowledge is not sufficient, but if practical application takes place the percentage of success in life would be greater (Arora, 2007).

## **Freire's Philosophy of Education**

### **Aims of Education**

Paulo Freire has often been cited as one of the most influential critical thinkers on the topic of education during the late twentieth century. Freire's philosophy begins from a deep respect and humility for the oppressed people and respect for their understanding of the world they inhabit.

Freire believed that oppressed could transform their situation in life by thinking critically about reality and then taking action. The alleviation of oppression and human suffering is possible through education (Freire, 1996). When oppressed people learn about their own culture, history, religion, heritage, etc., the knowledge they get can have a transformative effect on their lives and lead to their own empowerment. However, Freire believed that education itself is suffering from narrative sickness and has played a central role in maintaining oppression and thus it has to be reformed in order for things to change for the oppressed ( Deans, 1999).

Freire's term for traditional education, the "*banking education*" focused on the stifling creative and critical thought in mass education. He believes that banking education allows the oppressors to maintain the system of oppression (Freire, 1988). In Freire's view, students under this system do not have the opportunity to question or critically evaluate the world in which they live and thus have no opportunity to change their lives for the better (Freire, 1973). Freire says that Education is not reducible to a mechanical method of instruction. He further adds that learning is not a quantity of information to be memorized or a package of skills to be transferred to students.

Freire's Social Pedagogy defines Education where individual and society are constructed, a social action which can either empower or domesticate students. He said that Education should be such which leads to democratization of culture, a program which itself would be an act of creation, capable of realizing other creative acts ( Deans, 1999). The empowering or liberating education, Freire suggests, is not a new data bank or doctrine delivered to students, it is instead a democratic and transformative relationship between students and teachers, students and learning and students and society.

### **Curriculum and Pedagogy**

Freire argues that whole activity of education is Political in nature (Kirkendall, 2001). Politics is in the teacher student relationship, whether authoritarian or democratic. Politics is in the subjects chosen for the syllabus and in those left out. It is also in the method of choosing course content, whether it is a shared decision or only the teacher's prerogative, whether there is a negotiated curriculum in the classroom or one imposed unilaterally. Freire emphasizes that society

is controlled by an elite which imposes its culture and values as the standard (Freire, 1994). In schooling, this imposed standard is transferred through a traditional curriculum which interferes with democratic and critical development of students.

While agreeing with Freire's work, it is my opinion that curriculum should directly come from the people and must be prepared by them. Curriculum should be built around the themes and conditions of people's lives. For this, it is essential that educators should study their students in their classrooms and in their community to discover the words, ideas, conditions and habits central to their experience.

Freire emphasizes that curriculum should be based on the experience of the learners which should enable the learner to interpret their existing situation, critically examine it and then act upon it. Curriculum should be based on bottom up approach (Arora, 2007). He believes that students should have a right to negotiate the curriculum and of evaluating it. The curriculum should be balanced for every gender, class and race. After developing the curriculum, the selection of subject content should be based on students thoughts and language. Freire emphasizes that curriculum should not be presented as a jargon but rather as problem posed in students' experiences and speech, for them to work on.

Freire's pedagogy includes the goal of critical consciousness. His pedagogical methods are student centered which attempt to help students to become critically conscious of reality and to challenge domination. These pedagogical methods are as follows:

### **Dialogue**

Dialogue is a classic, old and proven method in education. Freire laid out many components of a liberating education in *pedagogy of the oppressed* out of which dialogue is the central component. Freire conceptualizes dialogue as a conversation among equals. Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world (Freire, 1988). Dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not want this naming; between those who deny other people the right to speak their world and those who are right to speak has been denied to them (Freire, 1988). Dialogue is the important process in which problems are named and solutions are proposed. Dialogue is useful because it gives individuals the opportunity to share their experiences in a supportive and constructive atmosphere. In this situation, participants or students specifically identify what is oppressive and how one might take steps to end that oppression.

This however must be done carefully. Freire argued that dialogue must include the following traits: profound love for the world and for the people, humility, hope and mutual trust (Freire, 1988). Freire does mention that dialogue will not help participants become more fully human but can only be fruitful if it is coupled with critical thinking and in turn critical thinking will lend itself to transformation.

At the centre of dialogue is the important and valuable process of critical thinking. Critical thinking or what Freire called *conscientization* (Freire, 1973) which refers to learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of the reality. In order to confront oppression, it is essential that students first become critical thinkers. It is only through problem posing education that students can become critical thinkers who view the world not as a static reality but reality in process, in transformation.

## **Praxis**

Once students have become critical thinkers, they will be able to begin a process that could lead to their *humanization*. Freire referred to this process as *praxis* (Freire, 1973). He defined this process as reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it. This process would involve constant reflection and evaluation. However, Freire believes that this process cannot be carried out in authoritarian form of education such as banking education which inhibits the liberation and freedom of the oppressed. He argued that change could come through a process of dialogue and reflection leading on to change through action or intervention (Freire, 1988). Freire believed that Praxis is at the heart of transforming the world and thus becoming fully human.

## **Generative Themes and Codifications**

Freire believes that in order for an educational experience to be relevant and important, the teacher-student and the student-teacher need to work together to identify the themes to create the program content or educational units of study (Freire, 1978). These themes are known as *generative themes*. These generative themes are presented in the form of codifications (visual representations). Participants are able to step back from these visual representations of their ideas or history and decode or explore them critically by regarding them objectively rather than simply experiencing them. This makes it possible for the participants to intervene and initiate change in society. In all the stages of decoding, people externalize their view of the world (Freire, 1988).

Once the decoding on the circles have been completed, the last stage of the investigation begins. The investigators undertake a systematic study of their findings. Freire argued that the starting point for organizing the program content of education must be the present, existential, concrete situations reflecting the aspirations of the people (Freire, 1988). It is important, Freire mentions, that the people feel like masters of their thinking by discussing the thinking and views of the world explicitly or implicitly manifest in their own suggestion and those of their comrades (Freire, 1988).

## **Teaching – Learning Environment**

For Freire, teaching and learning are human experiences with profound social consequences. Classroom die as intellectual centers when they become delivery systems for lifeless bodies of knowledge. Instead of transferring facts and skills from teacher to students, a Freirean class invites students to think critically about subject matter, doctrines, the learning process itself and their society (Freire, 1996). In the liberating classroom suggested by Freire's ideas, teachers pose problems derived from student life, social issues and academic subjects, in a mutually created dialogue.

In a Freirean classroom, teachers reject the methods which make student passive and anti-intellectual. They do not lecture students into silence. They do not prepare students for a life of political alienation in society. Rather, Freirean education post critical problems to students, treat them as complicated, substantial human beings and encourage curiosity and activism about knowledge and the world. Freire insists on consistency between the democratic values of critical pedagogy and the classroom practice. A liberating classroom teacher is not an authority exercising force to maintain discipline rather liberating classroom emphasis on self discipline and collaboration.

According to Freire, teachers have to lead the class with a democratic learning process as well as with critical ideas. Accordingly, teaching- learning environment should be based on the following characteristics:

**Participatory** - The learning process should be interactive and cooperative so that students do a lot of discussing and writing instead of listening to teacher talk.

**Dialogic** - The basic format of the class is dialogue around problem posed by teacher and students. The teacher initiates this process and guides it into deeper phases. By frontloading questions and back loading lectures, the teacher invites students to assert their ownership of their education building the dialogue with their words.

**Democratic** - The classroom discourse is democratic in so far as it is constructed mutually by students and teacher. Students have equal speaking rights in the dialogue as well as right to negotiate the curriculum. They are asked to co-develop and evaluate the curriculum.

**Activist** - The classroom should be active and interactive based on problem posing, cooperative learning and participatory formats.

**Affective** - The teaching learning environment should be critical and democratic leading to the development of human feelings as well as development of social inquiry and conceptual habits of mind.

Freire's problem posing develops co-intentionality among students and teachers which make teaching-learning collectively owned, not the teacher's sole role. Co-intentionality begins when the teacher presents a problem for inquiry related to a key aspect of student experience so that students see their thought and language in the study. This mutuality helps students and teachers overcome the alienation from each other developed in traditional banking classrooms.

### **Teacher – Student Relationship**

Usually, teacher - student relationship at any level inside or outside the school is narrative in nature. This relationship involves a narrating subject (teacher) and patient listening objects (students). This makes education an act of narration known as banking concept of education where the teacher teaches and students are taught (Freire, 1988). The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, and predictable. His task is to fill the student with content of his narration-contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them. The students patiently receive, memorize and repeat the content. Education thus become an act of depositing in which the students are the depositories and teacher is the depositor. The teacher is the subject of the learning process while the pupils are mere objects.

A Freirean critical teacher is a problem poser who asks thought provoking questions and encourages students to ask their own questions. A critical teacher must also be a democratic one. Freirean problem posing education also invites the students to question the system they live in and the knowledge being offered to them, to discuss what kind of future they want.

In problem posing education the teacher is always cognitive. She regards objects as reflecting upon by students and herself and not as her private property. Students are no longer passive listeners, but critical individuals. The role of the teacher is to create together with the students the conditions under which true knowledge can be attained. The teacher should consider himself or herself as students among students giving rise to a new term that is teacher-student with students-teachers that is a teacher who learns and learner who teaches.

### **Significance of Freire's Philosophy of Education in Kenya Today**

Freire's emphasis on Critical educational theory or critical pedagogy encourages students to question issues of power. Facilitating the development of critical literacy promotes the examination and reform of social situations and exposes students to the biases and hidden agendas within texts. Teachers can help to empower students by providing opportunities for them to find their voices. Freire's emphasis on dialogue enables educators to develop lessons based on the needs and interests of the learners to invite them to take part in a larger community discourse that attempts to solve problems and create alternatives to oppressive situations.

Paulo Freire's critique of traditional education that suppress the oppressed and helps to keep the oppressed in subjugation need to be applied to the Kenyan educational scenario. There is too much emphasis for narration and memorizing in the country's education system to the complete neglect of creative or critical thinking. This methodology needs to be changed completely so that learning becomes a real cognitive activity which leads to meaningful and purposeful transformative action. Although, Freire has opened an avenue for liberating education, it has to be reinvented according to one's own situations and in one's own words. Besides educational impacts, in a country like Kenya there are many people who are oppressed- Many are not aware of their rights.

### **Conclusion**

According to Paulo Freire education has to be a liberating force for the oppressed wherein the oppressed indulge in dialogue by raising questions and debating answers and this pedagogy in turn supports critical thought. Therefore teachers need to be learners themselves who do not force their views on pupils'. In other words education should be that which liberates to create and innovate.

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